EPILOGUE

MEDITATIO PAUPERIS IN SOLITUDINE

DAY UNTO DAY UTTERETH SPEECH. THE CLOUDS CHANGE. The seasons pass over our woods and fields in their slow and regular procession, and time is gone before you are aware of it.

Christ pours down the Holy Ghost upon you from heaven in the fire of June, and then you look about you and realize that you are standing in the barnyard husking corn, and the cold wind of the last days of October is sweeping across the thin woods and biting you to the bone. And then, in a minute or so, it is Christmas, and Christ is born.

At the last of the three great Masses, celebrated as a Solemn Pontifical High Mass with Pontifical Tierce, I am one of the minor ministers. We have vested in the Sacristy, have waited in the sanctuary. In the thunder of the organ music, Reverend Father has come with the monks in procession through the cloister, and has knelt a moment before the Blessed Sacrament in the Chapel of Our Lady of Victories. Then Tierce begins. After that the solemn vesting and I present the crozier with the suitable bows, and they go to the foot of the altar and the tremendous introit begins, in the choir, summing up with the splendor of its meaning the whole of Christmas. The Child born on earth, in lowliness, in the crib, before the shepherds, is born this day in heaven in glory, in magnificence, in majesty: and the day in which He is born is

eternity. He is born forever, All-Power, All-Wisdom, begotten before the day-star: He is the beginning and the end, everlastingly born of the Father, the Infinite God: and He Himself is the same God, God of God, Light of Light, True God of True God. God born of Himself, forever: Himself His own second Person: One, yet born of Himself forever.

He it is also that is born each instant in our hearts: for this unending birth, this everlasting beginning, without end, this everlasting, perfect newness of God begotten of Himself, issuing from Himself without leaving Himself or altering His one-ness, this is the life that is in us. But see: He is suddenly born again, also, on this altar, upon that cloth and corporal as white as snow beneath the burning lights, and raised up above us in the hush of the consecration! Christ, the Child of God, the Son, made Flesh, with His All-power. What will You say to me, this Christmas, O Jesus? What is it that You have prepared for me at Your Nativity?

At the *Agnus Dei* I put aside the crozier and we all go to the Epistle side, together, to receive the kiss of peace. We bow to one another. The salutation passes from one to the other. Heads bow. Hands are folded again. Now we all turn around together.

And suddenly I find myself looking straight into the face of Bob Lax. He is standing at the benches that are drawn up, there, for visitors. He is so close to the step of the sanctuary, that if he were any closer he would be in it.

And I say to myself: "Good, now he'll get baptized too."

After dinner I went to Reverend Father's room and told him who Lax was, and that he was an old friend of mine, and asked if I might speak to him. We are ordinarily only allowed to receive visits from our own families, but since I had practically nothing left of my family, Reverend Father agreed that I might speak to Lax for a little while. And I mentioned that I thought he might be ready to be baptized.

"Isn't he a Catholic?" said Reverend Father.

"No, Reverend Father, not yet."

"Well, in that case, why was he taking Communion last night at the midnight Mass? . . ."

Up in the Guest House, Lax told me how the Baptism had come about. He had been at the University of North Carolina teaching some

earnest young men how to write radio plays. Towards the end of Advent he had got a letter from Rice which said, in so many words, "Come to New York and we will find a priest and ask him to baptize you."

All of a sudden, after all those years of debating back and forth, Lax just got on the train and went to New York. Nobody had ever put the matter up to him like that before.

They found a Jesuit in that big church up on Park Avenue and he baptized him, and that was that.

So then Lax had said: "Now I will go to the Trappists in Kentucky and visit Merton."

Bob Gibney told him: "You were a Jew and now you are a Catholic. Why don't you black your face? Then you will be all the three things the Southerners hate most."

The night had already fallen, Christmas Eve, when Lax got to Bardstown. He stood by the road to hitch a ride to the monastery. Some fellows picked him up, and while they were driving along, they began talking about the Jews the way some people talk about the Jews.

So Lax said that he was not only a Catholic but a converted Jew.

"Oh," said the fellows in the car, "of course, you understand we were talking about *orthodox* Jews."

From Lax I heard the first scraps of information about all the friends I had not forgotten: about Bob Gerdy who was in England in the Army, after having been baptized into the Church in September. Rice was working on one of those picture magazines. Gibney had got married, and soon he and Lax would also be working on another picture magazine—a new one that had started since I came to the monastery, called *Parade* or *Fanfare* or something like that. I don't know if Peggy Wells had already gone to Hollywood, but she went soon and is there still. Nancy Flagg was working either on *Vogue* or *Harper's Bazaar.* Somehow, too, I have the impression that all the people who had lived in the cottage at Olean the summer I did not enter the Franciscans, had at one point got themselves jobs on the magazine *House and Garden.* The whole thing is very obscure and mysterious. Perhaps it is something I dreamed. But for those three or four months, or however long it was, *House and Garden* must have been quite a magazine! Surely nothing like the old *House and Garden* I used to yawn over in the doctor's office.

And Seymour was in India. He was in the army. He had not yet, as far as I knew, found any practical application for his jujitsu. In India his chief task was to edit a paper for the boys in the army. So one day he walked in to the printing press, where all the typesetters working for him were Hindus, nice peaceful fellows. And Seymour, in the middle of the printing press and in full view of all his native staff, swatted a fly with a report that rang through the shop like a cannon. Instantly all the Hindus stopped work and filed out on strike. I suppose that was the time Seymour had leisure enough to travel to Calcutta and pay a visit to Bramachari.

When Lax went back to New York he took with him a manuscript of some poems. Half of them had been written since I entered the novitiate. The other half went back, mostly, to the days at St. Bonaventure. It was the first time I had looked at them since I had come to Gethsemani. Getting these poems together and making a selection was like editing the work of a stranger, a dead poet, someone who had been forgotten.

Lax took this collection to Mark Van Doren, and Mark sent it to James Laughlin at New Directions, and just before Lent I heard he was going to print it.

The exceedingly tidy little volume, *Thirty Poems,* reached me at the end of November, just before we began the annual retreat, in 1944.

I went out under the grey sky, under the cedars at the edge of the cemetery, and stood in the wind that threatened snow and held the printed poems in my hand.

II

BY THIS TIME I SHOULD HAVE BEEN DELIVERED OF ANY PROBLEMS about my true identity. I had already made my simple profession. And my vows should have divested me of the last shreds of any special identity.

But then there was this shadow, this double, this writer who had followed me into the cloister.

He is still on my track. He rides my shoulders, sometimes, like the old man of the sea. I cannot lose him. He still wears the name of Thomas Merton. Is it the name of an enemy?

He is supposed to be dead.

But he stands and meets me in the doorway of all my prayers, and follows me into church. He kneels with me behind the pillar, the Judas, and talks to me all the time in my ear.

He is a business man. He is full of ideas. He breathes notions and new schemes. He generates books in the silence that ought to be sweet with the infinitely productive darkness of contemplation.

And the worst of it is, he has my superiors on his side. They won't kick him out. I can't get rid of him.

Maybe in the end he will kill me, he will drink my blood.

Nobody seems to understand that one of us has got to die.

Sometimes I am mortally afraid. There are the days when there seems to be nothing left of my vocation—my contemplative vocation—but a few ashes. And everybody calmly tells me: "Writing is your vocation."

And there he stands and bars my way to liberty. I am bound to the earth, in his Egyptian bondage of contracts, reviews, page proofs, and all the plans for books and articles that I am saddled with.

When I first began to get ideas about writing, I told them to Father Master and Father Abbot with what I thought was "simplicity." I thought I was just "being open with my superiors." In a way, I suppose I was.

But it was not long before they got the idea that I ought to be put to work translating things, writing things.

It is strange. The Trappists have sometimes been definite, even exaggerated, in their opposition to intellectual work in the past. That was one of the big battle cries of De Rancé. He had a kind of detestation for monkish dilettantes and he took up arms against the whole Benedictine Congregation of Saint Maur in a more or less quixotic battle that ended in a reconciliation scene between De Rancé and the great Dom Mabillon that reads like Oliver Goldsmith. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it was considered a kind of a monastic sin for a Trappist to read anything but Scripture and the lives of the saints: and I mean those lives that are a chain of fantastic miracles interspersed with

pious platitudes. It was considered a matter worthy of suspicion if a monk developed too lively an interest in the Fathers of the Church.

But at Gethsemani I had walked into a far different kind of a situation.

In the first place, I entered a house that was seething with an energy and a growth that it had not known for ninety years. After nearly a century of struggle and obscurity, Gethsemani was suddenly turning into a very prominent and vital force in the Cistercian Order and the Catholic Church in America. The house was crowded with postulants and novices. There was no longer any room to hold them all. In fact, on the Feast of St. Joseph, 1944, when I made my simple profession, Father Abbot read out the names of those who had been chosen for the first daughter house of Gethsemani. Two days later, on the Feast of St. Benedict, the colony left for Georgia and took up its abode in a barn thirty miles from Atlanta, chanting the psalms in a hayloft. By the time this is printed there will have been another Cistercian monastery in Utah and another in New Mexico, and still another planned for the deep South.

This material growth at Gethsemani is part of a vaster movement of spiritual vitality that is working throughout the whole Order, all over the world. And one of the things it has produced has been a certain amount of Cistercian literature.

That there should be six Cistercian monasteries in the United States and a convent of nuns soon to come: that there should also be new foundations in Ireland and Scotland, all this means a demand for books in English about the Cistercian life and the spirituality of the Order and its history.

But besides that, Gethsemani has grown into a sort of a furnace of apostolic fire. Every week-end, during the summer, the Guest House is crowded with retreatants who pray and fight the flies and wipe the sweat out of their eyes and listen to the monks chanting the office and hear sermons in the library and eat the cheese that Brother Kevin makes down in the moist shadows of the cellar that is propitious for that kind of thing. And along with this retreat movement, Gethsemani has been publishing a lot of pamphlets.

There is a whole rack of them in the lobby of the Guest House.

Blue and yellow and pink and green and grey, with fancy printing on the covers or plain printing—some of them even with pictures—the pamphlets bear the legend: "A Trappist says . . ." "A Trappist declares . . ." "A Trappist implores . . ." "A Trappist asserts . . ." And what does a Trappist say, declare, implore, assert? He says things like this: It is time you changed your way of looking at things. Why don't you get busy and go to confession? After death: what? and things like that. These Trappists, they have something to tell laymen and laywomen, married men and single men, old men and young men, men in the army and men who have just come out of the army and men who are too crippled up to get into the army. They have a word of advice for nuns, and more than a word for priests. They have something to say about how to build a home, and about how to go through four years of college without getting too badly knocked about, spiritually, in the process.

And one of the pamphlets even has something to say about the Contemplative Life.

So it is not hard to see that this is a situation in which my double, my shadow, my enemy, Thomas Merton, the old man of the sea, has things in his favor. If he suggests books about the Order, his suggestions are heard. If he thinks up poems to be printed and published, his thoughts are listened to. There seems to be no reason why he should not write for magazines. . . .

At the beginning of 1944, when I was getting near the time for simple profession, I wrote a poem to Saint Agnes on her feast in January, and when I had finished it my feeling was that I did not care if I never wrote another poem as long as I lived.

At the end of the year, when *Thirty Poems* were printed, I still felt the same way, and more so.

So then Lax came down again for another Christmas, and told me I should be writing more poems. I did not argue about it. But in my own heart I did not think it was God's will. And Dom Vital, my confessor, did not think so either.

Then one day—the Feast of the Conversion of Saint Paul, 1945—I went to Father Abbot for direction, and without my even thinking of the subject, or mentioning it, he suddenly said to me:

"I want you to go on writing poems."

III

IT IS VERY QUIET.

The morning sun is shining on the gate-house which is bright with new paint this summer. From here it looks as though the wheat is already beginning to ripen on St. Joseph's knoll. The monks who are on retreat for their ordination to the diaconate are digging in the Guest House garden.

It is very quiet. I think about this monastery that I am in. I think about the monks, my brothers, my fathers.

There are the ones who have a thousand things to do. Some are busy with food, some with clothing, some with fixing the pipes, some with fixing the roof. Some paint the house, some sweep the rooms, some mop the floor of the refectory. One goes to the bees with a mask on and takes away their honey. Three or four others sit in a room with typewriters and all day long they answer the letters of the people who write here asking for prayers because they are unhappy. Still others are fixing tractors and trucks, others are driving them. The brothers are fighting with the mules to get them into harness. Or they go out in the pasture after the cows. Or they worry about the rabbits. One of them says he can fix watches. Another is making plans for the new monastery in Utah.

The ones who have no special responsibility for chickens or pigs or writing pamphlets or packing them up to send out by mail or keeping the complicated accounts in our Mass book—the ones who have nothing special to do can always go out and weed the potatoes and hoe the rows of corn.

When the bell rings in the steeple, I will stop typing and close the windows of this room where I work. Frater Sylvester will put away that mechanical monster of a lawn-mower and his helpers will go home with their hoes and shovels. And I will take a book and walk up and down a bit under the trees, if there is time, before the Conventual Mass. And most of the others will sit in the scriptorium and write their theological conferences or copy things out of books on to the backs of envelopes. And one or two will stand around in a doorway that leads from

the Little Cloister to the monks' garden, and twine their rosaries around in their fingers and wait for something to happen.

After that we will all go to choir, and it will be hot, and the organ will be loud, and the organist, who is just learning, will make a lot of mistakes. But on the altar will be offered to God the eternal Sacrifice of the Christ to Whom we belong, and Who has brought us here together.

Congregavit nos in unum Christi amor.

IV

AMERICA IS DISCOVERING THE CONTEMPLATIVE LIFE.

There are paradoxes in the history of Christian spirituality and not the least of them is the apparent contradiction in the way the Fathers and modern Popes have looked at the active and contemplative lives. Saint Augustine and Saint Gregory lamented the "sterility" of contemplation, which was in itself, as they admitted, superior to action. Yet Pope Pius XI came out in the constitution "Umbratilem" with the clear statement that the contemplative life was *much more* fruitful for the Church *(multo plus ad Ecclesiae incrementa et humani generis salutem conferre . . .)* than the activity of teaching and preaching. What is all the more surprising to a superficial observer is the fact that such a pronouncement should belong to our energetic times.

Practically anyone who realizes the existence of the debate can tell you that Saint Thomas taught that there were three vocations: that to the active life, that to the contemplative, and a third to the mixture of both, and that this last is superior to the other two. The mixed life is, of course, the vocation of Saint Thomas's own order, the Friars Preachers.

But Saint Thomas also comes out flatly with a pronouncement no less uncompromising than the one we read from "Umbratilem." *Vita contemplativa,* he remarks, *simpliciter est melior quam activa* (the contemplative life in itself, by its very nature, is superior to the active life). What is more, he proves it by natural reason in arguments from a pagan philosopher—Aristotle. That is how esoteric the question is! Later on

he gives his strongest argument in distinctly Christian terms. The contemplative life directly and immediately occupies itself with the love of God, than which there is no act more perfect or more meritorious. Indeed that love is the root of all merit. When you consider the effect of individual merit upon the vitality of other members of the Mystical Body it is evident that there is nothing sterile about contemplation. On the contrary Saint Thomas's treatment of it in this question shows that the contemplative life establishes a man in the very heart of all spiritual fecundity.

When he admits that the active life *can* be more perfect under certain circumstances, accidentally, he hedges his statement in with half a dozen qualifications of a strictness that greatly enhances what he has already said about contemplation. First, activity will only be more perfect than the joy and rest of contemplation if it is undertaken as the result of an overflow of love for God *(propter abundantiam divini amoris)* in order to fulfill His will. It is not to be continuous, only the answer to a temporary emergency. It is purely for God's glory, and it does not dispense us from contemplation. It is an added obligation, and we must return as soon as we morally can to the powerful and fruitful silence of recollection that disposes our souls for divine union.

First comes the active life (practice of virtues, mortification, charity) which prepares us for contemplation. Contemplation means rest, suspension of activity, withdrawal into the mysterious interior solitude in which the soul is absorbed in the immense and fruitful silence of God and learns something of the secret of His perfections less by seeing than by fruitive love.

Yet to stop here would be to fall short of perfection. According to Saint Bernard of Clairvaux it is the comparatively weak soul that arrives at contemplation but does not overflow with a love that must communicate what it knows of God to other men. For all the great Christian mystics without exception, Saint Bernard, Saint Gregory, Saint Theresa, Saint John of the Cross, Blessed John Ruysbroeck, Saint Bonaventure, the peak of the mystical life is a marriage of the soul with God which gives the saints a miraculous power, a smooth and tireless energy in working for God and for souls, which bears fruits in the sanctity of thousands and changes the course of religious and even secular history.

With this in mind, Saint Thomas could not fail to give the highest place to a vocation which, in his eyes, seemed destined to lead men to such a height of contemplation that the soul must overflow and communicate its secrets to the world.

Unfortunately Saint Thomas's bare statement "the religious institutes which are ordered to the work of preaching and teaching hold the highest rank in religion" is, frankly, misleading. It conjures up nothing more than a mental image of some pious and industrious clerics bustling from the library to the classroom. If it meant no more than this the solution would be hardly comprehensible to a Christian. Yet the tragedy is that many—including members of those "mixed" Orders—cannot find in it any deeper significance. If you can give a half-way intelligent lecture applying some thoughts from scholastic philosophy to the social situation, that alone places you very near the summit of perfection. . . .

No, we keep our eyes on those flaming words which lay down the conditions under which it is valid to leave contemplation for action. First of all *propter abundantiam divini amoris.* The "mixed life" is to be rated above that of the pure contemplatives only on the supposition that their love is *so much more vehement, so much more abundant* that it has to pour itself out in teaching and preaching.

In other words Saint Thomas is here teaching us that the so-called mixed vocation can only be superior to the contemplative vocation if it is itself *more contemplative.* This conclusion is inescapable. It imposes a tremendous obligation. Saint Thomas is really saying that the Dominican, the Franciscan, the Carmelite must be supercontemplatives. Either that or he is contradicting everything he said about the superiority of the contemplative.

Whether the "mixed" Orders today in America are actually as contemplative as this program would demand is a question I have no intention of answering. But at any rate it seems that most of them have reached, in practice, a sort of compromise to get out of the difficulty. They divide up their duties between their nuns and their priests. The nuns live in cloisters and do the contemplating and the priests live in colleges and cities and do the teaching and preaching. In the light of *"Umbratilem"* and the doctrine of the Mystical Body this solution is at

least possible, if conditions leave them with no other way out. Saint Thomas, however, envisaged a program that was far more complete and satisfactory, for the individual and for the Church!

But what about the contemplative Orders? Their rules and usages at least grant them all they need to dispose themselves for contemplation and if their members do not reach it, it is not because of any difficulty inherent in their actual way of life. Granting that they are, or can be, as contemplative as they were meant to be by their founders: are they anything else?

The fact is, there does not exist any such thing as a purely contemplative Order of men—an Order which does not have, somewhere in its constitution, the note of *contemplata tradere.* The Carthusians, with all their elaborate efforts to preserve the silence and solitude of the hermit's life in their monasteries, definitely wrote into their original "Customs" the characteristic labor of copying manuscripts and writing books in order that they might preach to the world by their pen even though their tongues were silent.

The Cistercians had no such legislation, and they even enacted statutes to limit the production of books and to forbid poetry altogether. Nevertheless they produced a school of mystical theologians which, as Dom Berlière says, represents the finest flower of Benedictine spirituality. I just quoted what Saint Bernard, the head of that school, had to say on the subject, and in any case even if the Cistercians never wrote anything to pass on the fruit of their contemplation to the Church at large, *contemplata tradere* would always be an essential element in Cistercian life to the extent that the abbot and those charged with the direction of souls would always be obliged to feed the rest of the monks with the good bread of mystical theology as it comes out in smoking hot loaves from the oven of contemplation. This was what Saint Bernard told the learned cleric of York, Henry Murdach, to lure him from his books into the woods where the beeches and elms taught the monks wisdom.

And these "purely active" Orders, what about them? Do any such things exist? The Little Sisters of the Poor, the nursing sisterhoods cannot truly fulfil their vocations unless there is something of that *contemplata tradere,* the sharing of the fruits of contemplation. Even the active vocation is sterile without an interior life, and a deep interior life at that.

The truth is, in any kind of a religious Order there is not only the possibility but even in some sense the obligation of leading, at least to some extent, the highest of all lives—contemplation, and the sharing of its fruits with others. Saint Thomas's principle stands firm: the greatest perfection is *contemplata tradere.* But that does not oblige us to restrict this vocation, as he does, to the teaching Orders. They only happen to be the ones that seem to be best equipped to pass on the knowledge of God acquired by loving Him—if they have acquired that knowledge in contemplation. Yet others may perhaps be better placed for acquiring it.

In any case, there are many different ways of sharing the fruits of contemplation with others. You don't have to write books or make speeches. You don't have to have direct contact with souls in the confessional. Prayer can do the work wonderfully well, and indeed the fire of contemplation has a tendency to spread of itself throughout the Church and vivify all the members of Christ in secret without any conscious act on the part of the contemplative. But if you argue that Saint Thomas's context limits us at least to some sort of visible and natural communication with our fellow men (though it is hard to see why this should be so) nevertheless even in that event there exists a far more powerful means of sharing the mystical and experimental knowledge of God.

Look in Saint Bonaventure's *Itinerarium* and you will find one of the best descriptions ever written of this highest of all vocations. It is a description which the Seraphic Doctor himself learned on retreat and in solitude on Mount Alvernia. Praying in the same lonely spot where the great founder of his Order, Saint Francis of Assisi, had had the wounds of Christ burned into his hands and feet and side, Saint Bonaventure saw, by the light of a supernatural intuition, the full meaning of this tremendous event in the history of the Church. "There," he says, "Saint Francis 'passed over into God' *(in Deum transiit)* in the ecstasy *(excessus)* of contemplation and thus he was set up as an example of perfect contemplation just as he had previously been an example of perfection in the active life in order that God, through him, might draw all truly spiritual men to this kind of 'passing over' *(transitus)* and ecstasy, *less by word than by example.*"

Here is the clear and true meaning of *contemplata tradere,* expressed without equivocation by one who had lived that life to the full. It is the

vocation to transforming union, to the height of the mystical life and of mystical experience, to the very transformation into Christ that Christ living in us and directing all our actions might Himself draw men to desire and seek that same exalted union because of the joy and the sanctity and the supernatural vitality radiated by our example—or rather because of the secret influence of Christ living within us in complete possession of our souls.

And notice the tremendously significant fact that St. Bonaventure makes no divisions and distinctions: Christ imprinted His own image upon Saint Francis in order to draw not some men, not a few privileged monks, but *all* truly spiritual men to the perfection of contemplation which is nothing else but the perfection of love. Once they have reached these heights they will draw others to them in their turn. So any man may be called at least *de jure,* if not *de facto,* to become fused into one spirit with Christ in the furnace of contemplation and then go forth and cast upon the earth that same fire which Christ wills to see enkindled.

This means, in practice, that there is only one vocation. Whether you teach or live in the cloister or nurse the sick, whether you are in religion or out of it, married or single, no matter who you are or what you are, you are called to the summit of perfection: you are called to a deep interior life perhaps even to mystical prayer, and to pass the fruits of your contemplation on to others. And if you cannot do so by word, then by example.

Yet if this sublime fire of infused love burns in your soul, it will inevitably send forth throughout the Church and the world an influence more tremendous than could be estimated by the radius reached by words or by example. Saint John of the Cross writes: "A very little of this pure love is more precious in the sight of God and of greater profit to the Church, even though the soul appear to be doing nothing, than are all other works put together."

Before we were born, God knew us. He knew that some of us would rebel against His love and His mercy, and that others would love Him from the moment that they could love anything, and never change that love. He knew that there would be joy in heaven among the angels of His house for the conversion of some of us, and He knew that He

would bring us all here to Gethsemani together, one day, for His own purpose, for the praise of His love.

The life of each one in this abbey is part of a mystery. We all add up to something far beyond ourselves. We cannot yet realize what it is. But we know, in the language of our theology, that we are all members of the Mystical Christ, and that we all grow together in Him for Whom all things were created.

In one sense we are always travelling, and travelling as if we did not know where we were going.

In another sense we have already arrived.

We cannot arrive at the perfect possession of God in this life, and that is why we are travelling and in darkness. But we already possess Him by grace, and therefore in that sense we have arrived and are dwelling in the light.

But oh! How far have I to go to find You in Whom I have already arrived!

For now, oh my God, it is to You alone that I can talk, because nobody else will understand. I cannot bring any other man on this earth into the cloud where I dwell in Your light, that is, Your darkness, where I am lost and abashed. I cannot explain to any other man the anguish which is Your joy nor the loss which is the Possession of You, nor the distance from all things which is the arrival in You, nor the death which is the birth in You because I do not know anything about it myself and all I know is that I wish it were over—I wish it were begun.

You have contradicted everything. You have left me in no-man's land.

You have got me walking up and down all day under those trees, saying to me over and over again, "Solitude, solitude." And You have turned around and thrown the whole world in my lap. You have told me, "Leave all things and follow me," and then You have tied half of New York to my foot like a ball and chain. You have got me kneeling behind that pillar with my mind making a noise like a bank. Is that contemplation?

Before I went to make my solemn vows, last spring, on the Feast of St. Joseph, in the thirty-third year of my age, being a cleric in minor orders—before I went to make my solemn vows, this is what it looked like to me. It seemed to me that You were almost asking me to give up

all my aspirations for solitude and for a contemplative life. You were asking me for obedience to superiors who will, I am morally certain, either make me write or teach philosophy or take charge of a dozen material responsibilities around the monastery, and I may even end up as a retreat master preaching four sermons a day to the seculars who come to the house. And even if I have no special job at all, I will always be on the run from two in the morning to seven at night.

Didn't I spend a year writing the life of Mother Berchmans who was sent to a new Trappistine foundation in Japan, and who wanted to be a contemplative? And what happened to her? She had to be gatekeeper and guest-mistress and sacristan and cellaress and mistress of the lay sisters all at the same time. And when they relieved her of one or two of those jobs it was only in order to give her heavier ones, like that of Mistress of Novices.

Martha, Martha, sollicita eris, et turbaberis erga plurima . . .

When I was beginning my retreat, before solemn profession, I tried to ask myself for a moment if those vows had any condition attached to them. If I was called to be a contemplative and they did not help me to be a contemplative, but hindered me, then what?

But before I could even begin to pray, I had to drop that kind of thinking.

By the time I made my vows, I decided that I was no longer sure what a contemplative was, or what the contemplative vocation was, or what my vocation was, and what our Cistercian vocation was. In fact I could not be sure I knew or understood much of anything except that I believed that You wanted me to take those particular vows in this particular house on that particular day for reasons best known to Yourself, and that what I was expected to do after that was follow along with the rest and do what I was told and things would begin to become clear.

That morning when I was lying on my face on the floor in the middle of the church, with Father Abbot praying over me, I began to laugh, with my mouth in the dust, because without knowing how or why, I had actually done the right thing, and even an astounding thing. But what was astounding was not my work, but the work You worked in me.

The months have gone by, and You have not lessened any of those

desires, but You have given me peace, and I am beginning to see what it is all about. I am beginning to understand.

Because You have called me here not to wear a label by which I can recognize myself and place myself in some kind of a category. You do not want me to be thinking about what I am, but about what You are. Or rather, You do not even want me to be thinking about anything much: for You would raise me above the level of thought. And if I am always trying to figure out what I am and where I am and why I am, how will that work be done?

I do not make a big drama of this business. I do not say: "You have asked me for everything, and I have renounced all." Because I no longer desire to see anything that implies a distance between You and me: and if I stand back and consider myself and You as if something had passed between us, from me to You, I will inevitably see the gap between us and remember the distance between us.

My God, it is that gap and that distance which kill me.

That is the only reason why I desire solitude—to be lost to all created things, to die to them and to the knowledge of them, for they remind me of my distance from You. They tell me something about You: that You are far from them, even though You are in them. You have made them and Your presence sustains their being, and they hide You from me. And I would live alone, and out of them. *O beata solitudo!*

For I knew that it was only by leaving them that I could come to You: and that is why I have been so unhappy when You seemed to be condemning me to remain in them. Now my sorrow is over, and my joy is about to begin: the joy that rejoices in the deepest sorrows. For I am beginning to understand. You have taught me, and have consoled me, and I have begun again to hope and learn.

I hear You saying to me:

"I will give you what you desire. I will lead you into solitude. I will lead you by the way that you cannot possibly understand, because I want it to be the quickest way.

"Therefore all the things around you will be armed against you, to deny you, to hurt you, to give you pain, and therefore to reduce you to solitude.

"Because of their enmity, you will soon be left alone. They will cast you out and forsake you and reject you and you will be alone.

"Everything that touches you shall burn you, and you will draw your hand away in pain, until you have withdrawn yourself from all things. Then you will be all alone.

"Everything that can be desired will sear you, and brand you with a cautery, and you will fly from it in pain, to be alone. Every created joy will only come to you as pain, and you will die to all joy and be left alone. All the good things that other people love and desire and seek will come to you, but only as murderers to cut you off from the world and its occupations.

"You will be praised, and it will be like burning at the stake. You will be loved, and it will murder your heart and drive you into the desert.

"You will have gifts, and they will break you with their burden. You will have pleasures of prayer, and they will sicken you and you will fly from them.

"And when you have been praised a little and loved a little I will take away all your gifts and all your love and all your praise and you will be utterly forgotten and abandoned and you will be nothing, a dead thing, a rejection. And in that day you shall begin to possess the solitude you have so long desired. And your solitude will bear immense fruit in the souls of men you will never see on earth.

"Do not ask when it will be or where it will be or how it will be: On a mountain or in a prison, in a desert or in a concentration camp or in a hospital or at Gethsemani. It does not matter. So do not ask me, because I am not going to tell you. You will not know until you are in it.

"But you shall taste the true solitude of my anguish and my poverty and I shall lead you into the high places of my joy and you shall die in Me and find all things in My mercy which has created you for this end and brought you from Prades to Bermuda to St. Antonin to Oakham to London to Cambridge to Rome to New York to Columbia to Corpus Christi to St. Bonaventure to the Cistercian Abbey of the poor men who labor in Gethsemani:

"That you may become the brother of God and learn to know the Christ of the burnt men."

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